

Late Summer Grassy Weeds in Lawns

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

With the crazy weather we've had this summer, I'm sure that there are a lot of home owners trying to figure out what these grassy weeds are that seem to shoot up seed heads faster than they can mow! The problem is bad every year but possibly worse this year due to heat and drought followed by excessive rainfall.

First of all let me say that there are a lot of grassy plants heading out right now. These are all warm season grasses that are in a hurry to produce some seed before the growing season ends in a few more weeks. Some of these are annual grasses that may only be a few weeks old that have grown a seed head that may only produce a dozen seeds, but they will do everything they can to make that seed before they die. I'm only going to talk about the most common species that I'm seeing in lawns right now. If there are other's you want identified, bring me a plant.

All of the grasses I'm going to talk about next are summer annuals with the exception of windmill grass. Windmill grass is a native perennial bunchgrass that has taken advantage of hot dry weather and is very obvious now. It's a fairly short plant and the seed head has "fingers" that emerge from the main stem at nearly right angles to the stem and often in layers. These seed head fingers are quite stiff. The seed heads break off after maturity and blow in the wind, scattering seed as they go. I should also add that photos of all these seedheads can be found on the following webpage: <http://gardeningwithchuck.com/weedygrasses.htm>. Since this is a perennial, crabgrass preventers won't help. Only one product is labeled for selective control of windmill grass and that is mesotrione (Tenacity). Best time to treat is NOT now, but in late June and early July.

All the rest of these are warm season annuals. They die with frosty temperatures this fall and start over from seed next spring. All of these are controlled with standard crabgrass preventers. There are post emerge products that can kill them even now, but it's really a waste of time as they will soon be dying anyway and they have already produced plenty of seed.

Foxtails have a small compact seed head that sort of looks like a fox's tail. There are three different species (green, yellow, giant) but it doesn't matter as they all have similar life cycles and growth habits. The seedheads can range from one half inch long to a couple of inches long. This is a common weed in vegetable and flower gardens and will grow in heavier shade than some of the other grassy weeds.

Crabgrass is the scourge of most homeowner's lawns. It has long stems that will fall down, root at the ground and send up new tillers. The seed head is sort of like windmillgrass but the "fingers" come off at a sharper angle and tend to be less rigid than windmill grass. The seedhead can be confused with Bermudagrass seed heads although the fingers of crabgrass are longer and the plant is very different. About this time of year crabgrass leaves often start to become very pale green or even yellow making it unattractive in lawns. Lastly we have the less common barnyardgrass. Barnyardgrass is tall, it has a coarse and rough seedhead and prefers wetter locations. This is what some homeowners call "watergrass".

While all of these, except windmill grass, will be dying with the frost, spraying won't be of much benefit. A better approach is to spend the coming weeks getting your lawn thickened up with appropriate taller mowing heights and fertilization as shaded soil is the best deterrent to all of these grasses becoming established.